That Ain’t Country:
Discourses of Authenticity
in America’s Most Popular Genre

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Acknowledgements

It's 3:40am on April 28, 2017. This thesis is due in less than 9 hours and I haven't slept properly all week. There is absolutely no way I would have survived the thesis process or the year without the following people, who I am so pleased to thank now. I'd like to thank my advisor, Prof. Maya Nadkarni, without whose support and generosity this project would not exist. Thanks as well to my family: Heather, Rick, Nicholas, and Katie Arestad - for putting up with my boring conversation for going on 20 years now. To my friends, especially Victor Almeida whose near constant companionship has been at all times a challenge and at all times a balm. To other students in the Soc/Anth department, especially Tom McGovern and Bolu Fakoya, for all the w(h)ine. To the musicians and songwriters whose work I address below, especially David Allan Coe - whose “If That Ain’t Country” gives its title to this thesis, thank you for making me feel how y’all feel inside. And to all the rest, thank you for spending even a little time with me. You have all made me who I am today.¹

¹ The first draft of these acknowledgements read: “Thanks to Prof. Maya Nadkarni for not failing me, and to the rest of you for nothing.”
Introduction

In one of my earliest memories, I sit in the passenger seat of my dad’s Volkswagen Beetle. It’s late summer and the windows are down -- the hot air blowing around in the tiny car is peppered with road dust. My dad’s singing along with the radio to Bobby Bare’s “Drop Kick Me Jesus” - a funny song that describes surrendering to the will of God using football as a metaphor. My dad’s voice is strong and clear, and to this day I maintain the only thing that’s kept him from a recording career of his own is a general inability to remember more than two lines to any song (that and a complete ineptitude with any instrument). As the final notes of “the only Christian-football waltz” fade out the shimmering picking of “Whiskey Lullaby” fades in. My dad stops singing, and for maybe the first time, I start listening. The song is a duet with balladeer and guitar hero Brad Paisley and bluegrass superstar Alison Krauss - the lyrics center around alcoholism, heartbreak, and death. After the song ended, I turned to my father and demanded he tell me what the song was about. The idea that songs could tell a story, could be meaningfully about something, was incredibly novel to me. My love affair with music starts right there, I hadn’t yet sung in school or picked up a guitar or met any musicians, but my inner world had been indelibly changed by this exposure to narrative form in songs. From then on, my self-concept was always musically oriented, and I credit music at least as much as literature for the development of my inner life. Because of where I grew up, “music” almost always meant “country.” At the risk of waxing nostalgic for too long, I think this anecdote makes explicit the intensely felt personal
relationship between music and some listeners. The stakes of defending particular categories or definitions of a musical genre may seem trivial for many, but for individuals whose lives are so intimately wrapped up with a particular musical lineage they are anything but.

Background

Country music is a genre of United States popular music that originated in the Southern United States in the 1920s with roots in Irish fiddle tunes, popular songs of the early 20th century, and the blues. In the nearly 100 years since its inception, country music has enjoyed a boom in consumption (now drawing listeners from all over the United States and the world) as well as production (with an increasing number of both records released and the musical variety of those recordings). Growing up in Waynesboro, PA in the northern Appalachian Mountains, country music was a part of daily life - listened to between classes, during the commute, and at community events. For many places USA, both urban and rural, this is still the case. However, country music as a genre has had to balance between, as Richard Peterson puts it, the 'ossification' of folk music and the 'elevation' of art music (1997:9). For Peterson, the key to this balancing act was the authenticity of country music - a quality which "is not inherent in the object of even that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct in which the past is to a degree misremembered" (1997:5).
The purpose of this research is to investigate various strategies of authenticity deployed by singers, songwriters, radio deejays, and promoters at the levels of both song and genre in a broader national (and increasingly international) context. Within the narrative context of a single song, what techniques or technologies are at play to place the musician within a broader historical lineage of musicians? How does the critical focus on musician biography circumscribe who counts and doesn’t count as a country singer? What is at stake when a singer abandons the label “country music” in favor of their own generic label (Daniel Romano’s ‘Mosey’ or Dale Watson’s ‘Ameripolitan’)? How do singers figure themselves vis a vis contemporary political climates and social movements? Each of these questions can be asked simultaneously in reverse - when and why are singers excommunicated from country radio? Which singers or songwriters are, based on their identity, excluded from the country music “club?” And what is at stake when someone makes the claim “That ain’t country”?

Drawing on the work of anthropologists, historians, and musicologists I intend to examine the “fabrication of authenticity” at three levels: the songs themselves, the situatedness of these songs in a broader generic structure, and the relationship between this genre and the (inter)national sociopolitical context. The most recent scholarship on this particular topic (that is, specifically the role of authenticity in country music) was produced by Alyssa Johnson as an MA thesis at USC-Columbia. While the work that follows is not a point by point refutation of Johnson’s recent thesis, a note on her treatment of the topic is relevant because it is symptomatic of a somewhat
journalistic approach to authenticity in country music that makes, I believe, two key errors -- one theoretical and one methodological.

Her first (theoretical) error stems from a somewhat flat and ahistorical understanding of authenticity rooted in a slight misreading of Richard Peterson (1997) and Heather Maclachlan (2008). She writes, “Musicians in [country music] are held to higher standards than others, and have to stay focused on being “real” and “traditional” to hold their place in this genre. The idea of authenticity in this particular context refers to music that sticks to the foundation of country music: rural, working-class themes set to music that should not be too polished or “mainstream” sounding” (2016:4). What Johnson misses here are the particular ways that Peterson, Hubbs, Maclachlan, etc. historicize the very concept of authenticity. By treating authenticity as an already-existing thing that artists approach or deviate from (or worse, merely have or do not have) Johnson fails to reckon for the ways that the authors in this field understand authenticity as being produced and manipulated by actors in a contested field by means of specific poetic, performative, or political strategies.

Johnson’s second (methodological) error comes from her narrow selection of research materials. Already focusing tightly on two megastars in the genre (Garth Brooks and George Strait) both prominent figures in the country music boom of the late 80s and early 90s, Johnson also restricts her analysis to their published biographical/promotional information (2016:10-11). It is quite possible that with a richer theoretical apparatus these data would be sufficient to address Johnson’s broader research questions. However in this case the small set of examples fails to do the work
that Johnson would like for two reasons. First, by focusing exclusively on biographical information, Johnson forecloses an investigation of alternative strategies artists might use to establish authenticity, such as their political affiliations, relationships with other performers, or even the content of the songs themselves. Second, by using only the most incredibly successful artists in the genre, Johnson finds herself looking at a pair of performers who have already very clearly “won” the “genre game.” In other words, it’s not particularly productive to ask “are Garth Brooks and George Strait authentic country singers?” because the answer (based on Johnson’s ultimate metric, record sales) is resoundingly yes.

Without dwelling too much longer on Johnson’s thesis, I intend in what follows to work against some of the problems she encountered. First, by theorizing authenticity as a claim made by actors through particular strategies I hope to avoid a flat or ahistorical understanding of what is meant by authenticity. This program pulls me out of the level of individual artists and away from a single period in the history of the genre and into a broader and more diachronic posture. This approach has its own challenges, which I will discuss below, but I think opens my investigation to a more nuanced understanding of authenticity in the genre. Second, by using multiple artists (including, critically, marginal figures in both country music history and the contemporary moment) and looking at strategies for producing authenticity at three distinct but articulated levels - viz. the song, the genre, and in broader national culture - I intend to get a more complete look at the ways that the genre hangs together around what I take to be an “authenticity complex.”
Authenticity

As I first approached the literature on authenticity in country music I was struck by an apparent dissonance between two broad intellectual traditions with an investment in treating authenticity. On one hand, existential philosophers (sketched by Jacob Golomb in *In Search of Authenticity: from Kierkegaard to Camus*), seemed to characterize authenticity as a an individual phenomenon and pay attention to the relationship between that individual actor, knowledge, and history. On the other, sociologists, anthropologists, and some historians of country music took a different tack by looking at authenticity as something to which various claims are made or a field in which belonging and authority is contested but to which few 'objective' features obtain. However, a more careful review of the literature shows significant common understanding of authenticity between these "distinct" fields.

Jacob Golomb begins *In Search of Authenticity* with a brief look at a set of "heroes," Kierkegaard's Abraham, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Sartre's Mathieu, and Camus' Meursault. "The thematic connection between these heroes is their wish to transcend their social and ethical predicaments and achieve authentic modes of living. Not content with being the heroes and heroines of their life-stories, they strive to write these stories themselves" (1995:3). The idea that one can transcend entirely one's social conditioning and live a meaningful life of radical individualism - an "authentic" life - runs almost entirely counter to both empirical findings in anthropology that are now
essentially fundamental disciplinary assumptions. However, as Golomb digs a little deeper into this material he develops an understanding of the “authentic” subject as one which “requires an incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence and self-creation. It calls for no particular contents or consequences but rather, focuses on the origins and the intensity of one’s emotional-existential commitments, on what Kierkegaard calls ‘subjective inwardness’ and Sartre ‘engagement’” (1995:9). As such, Golomb pushes us away from an existential understanding of authenticity as something which might denote objective qualities and towards an approach which figures authenticity as part of a dynamic configuration of the subject vis-a-vis the past.

This position is not dissimilar to the one taken by anthropologist and cultural historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, where he argues that, “Authenticity implies a relation with what is known that duplicates the two sides of historicity: it engages us both as actors and narrators... authenticity obtains only in regard to current practices that engage us as witnesses, actors, and commentators” (1995:150-1). It is this sense of continual engagement with history and what is known that brings philosophical and anthropological understandings of authenticity face-to-face. Effective treatments of authenticity in country music from the perspective of the social sciences emphasize 1) the historical ubiquity of shifts in what constitutes “authentic country music” and 2) the acknowledgement that, in the words of Nadine Hubbs, “there is no original, pure, or authentic form of country music of which commercial country represents a variant, dilution, of corruption” (2014:8). Taken together, these premises help us to conceptualize authenticity as another “form of
capital." This kind of capital is produced as part of a discursive field wherein various actors participate in an active struggle to define and defend competing conceptions of authenticity in order to make claims to history, relevance, personal integrity, musicianship, and “right” politics.

In her recent monograph, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, Nadine Hubbs doesn’t linger for very long on the notion of country music’s authenticity. However, her deployment of an effective critique of middle-class complaints about the disingenuity of country music allows her to crack open the genre for innovative readings of race, class, and sex-gender into the music (2014). Much of the work of figuring authenticity in music (and in country music specifically) was done in 1997 by Richard Peterson in his *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*.

[Record producers in the 1950s] sought new [country music] artists who were “authentic” and new songs that were “original.” While their pairing of authentic and original seemed strange initially, it now makes perfect sense. Prospective performers had to have the marks of tradition to make them credible, and the songs that would make them successful had to be original enough to show that their singers were not inauthentic copies of what had gone before, that is, that they were real” (Peterson 1997:209).

This notion of authenticity in the genre bears much resemblance to Golomb’s above comments on the adherence of real authenticity only to a dynamic subjects, while being balanced with an understanding of the relationship between identity and history that marks both the treatments of both Hubbs and Trouillot. It’s also very internally consistent with Peterson’s own understanding of authenticity as that special something which has kept country music a dynamic and popular (in the sense of an autochthonous
relationship to working-class audience) genre -- opposed to ossified folk music, abstracted art music, or merged/melded pop music.

As we can see, the conceptual overlap between disciplinary treatments of authenticity is very significant despite the differences in these particular intellectual traditions themselves. Another set of literatures addressing authenticity falls on the edge between musicology and organizational sociology. Using the domain of contemporary food and dining, Carroll and Wheaton (2009) develop “two very different classical symbolic interpretations of authenticity: (1) type authenticity, where the question involves whether an entity is true to its associated type (or category or genre); and (2) moral authenticity, where the issue concerns whether the decisions behind the enactment and operation of an entity reflect sincere choices (i.e., choices true to one’s self) rather than socially scripted responses” (2009:255). This balancing act between type authenticity and moral authenticity provides us with another framework to come to grips with the partial conflict between existential and social conceptions of authenticity addressed above.

Mattsson et al. (2010) present a framework for understanding authenticity and the “fuzziness” of generic categories drawing on Carroll and Wheaton (2009), as well as recent sociological theory from Hannan et al. (2007) on “audiences, codes and ecologies” - “genres are socially constructed semantic categories... labels to which the members of an audience collectively associate a set of default social codes” (2010:1357). Silver et al. (2016) also address the question of genre in the face of conflicting developments in musical genre theory which “suggests a declining
importance of genre categories," and sociology of classification which "argues for the
continued prevalence of genres as a meaningful tool through which creators, critics and
consumers focus their attention in the topology of available works" (2016:1).

While her topic is somewhat further afield, Susanna Larsson (2013) writing in
youth studies addresses conceptions of authenticity in Swedish heavy-metal
subcultures. She "investigates the ways in which heavy metal fans construct their selves
and collective in relation to the music and culture, by concentrating on subjective and
intersubjective arguments on what it means to be an authentic heavy metal fan"
(2013:95). This piece provides a compelling look at the reception-end and a clue
towards further ethnographic research as opposed to the production-side angle of music
studies provided by Peterson (1997) and Stimeling (2011), or Hubbs' (2016) more
literary treatment.

In terms of the broader field of country music and its particular fascination with
authenticity, an important concept to be clear about is the relationship between a few
styles of country music-making and the tension that comes with their self-definition.
Peterson describes the "dialectical" relationship between what he calls "hard-core" and
"soft-shell" country music - the grittier, roots-oriented "hard-core" imagines itself both as
an originary source of and conservative reaction against the more pop-oriented
"soft-shell" sound (1997:138). In recent years, however, a new force in country
music-making has come to some prominence in the popular imagination (or at least the
imagination of country music listeners/critics) - that is, the phenomenon of "alt-country."
Alt-country can be conceptualized as either a new term in the "hard-core/soft-shell"
dialectic, or as another factor which brings the one-dimensional “hard-core/soft-shell”
spectrum into a two dimensional grid. Regardless, the features of “alternative
authenticity” (Fox 2015) are distinct from and additive to those of country music
“authenticity” on its own. Both “hard-core” and “soft-shell” acts have access to the “alt”
label and the authenticity it accompanies. Ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox notes that while
conceptions of “alternative” cultures may position themselves against a “mainstream” or
“corporate” image, that they are nonetheless “linked to particular idioms of consumption”
(2015:165) rather than some anti-market, anti-commodity project. For example, Alison
Krauss is still widely considered “alternative” despite her global success because she
has stayed with her small label, Rounder Records, despite skyrocketing sales. Fox
identifies a few qualities of “alternative” commodity cultures at large including scale
(“alternative” organizations ought to be smaller than their “mainstream” counterparts,
and “authentic alternative” artists stick with smaller labels even if their sales skyrocket),
emplacement (there’s a sense of authentically alternative organizations having roots in
a particular place, “mainstream” organizations occupy the non-place of the popular
market), and “purity” or “naturalness” (alternative organizations position themselves in
“tense dialectical opposition with an implied, contaminated, artificial character of modern
mass culture,” which includes an intentionally limited engagement with excessively
mediating high-technology), which interact with other schemes of authenticity depending
on their domain - e.g. medicine, music, “lifestyle” (Fox 2015:165).

Fox’s explanation of the “alternative” in “alt country” adds another complicating
element to my broader analysis of authenticity in contemporary country music in that it
pays very direct attention to the question of who, specifically, is listening to “alt country” and why do they like it, often in opposition to “mainstream” country music with it’s hard-core/soft-shell dialectic? Fox’s criticism of promoters touting “alternative authenticity” is rooted in a clear sense of the class-based distinction between the “hothouse flowers” of mainstream country music with a largely working-class audience, and the bourgeois “ease” of much alt country which is as at home on the pages of the New York Times or in NPR studios as any Nashville alt country imprint. He suggests that what’s at stake in “alternative authenticity” may really be a kind of class-play, where mainstream country singers of working-class origin (he uses Shania Twain as an example) are “vilified and despised” as icons of the Nashville mainstream while local hard-country singers (such as his late mentor and informant Randy Meyers) “exist only in the nostalgic imaginary” (2015:186). This careful thinking serves my project as a broad reminder that authenticity is neither a natural given nor a set of abstracted ideals. It is instead the result of specific social practices and produced by/for particular individuals. Always adjacent to the question of “what is authentic?” is “who gets to decided?”

“Wind It Up!”

In the chapters that follow, I look at authenticity operating in country music at three levels. In the first chapter, I examine the production of country music as an interactive, intertextual field wherein claims to authenticity are made using references to
earlier singers. I suggest that the rich textual history of country music songwriting serves as a kind of canon from which singers can position themselves proximally vis-a-vis other actors in order to produce themselves to listeners as part and product of a particular generic lineage. In chapter two, I discuss the performative production of country music as a genre by investigating claims to authenticity at both its borders (using genre-deviating or “crossover” artists) and at its center (using recent debates about country music industry awards). In the third chapter, at the broadest level, I take a look at the relationship between country music and national politics by examining the genre’s reaction to the September 11 attacks and the resulting American invasion of the Persian Gulf. I suggest that “authenticity” in country music is about more than the songs and concerts and awards shows, but in fact includes extra-musical components such as affiliation with broad political programs (if not explicit policy positions).

Throughout this thesis the all-too-fraught concept of “authenticity,” regardless of the definition or mobilization used by a given actor, has two functions. The first is as a kind of gravitational force that holds the multiple and contested “particles” that make up country music together enough that the genre - despite its changes - remains distinct from other genres such as pop or rock. While it’s just as hard, if not harder than ever, to point to something and definitively say “that’s country,” and while surely a somehow resurrected Hank Williams Sr. would find the contemporary landscape of country music almost completely alien, the genre’s changes have rendered it fragmented but not incomprehensible. The second, as a “form of capital” that enables artists and songwriters room to maneuver within the shifting sonic and sociopolitical landscape of
country music. Singers who fail to comply to codes of country authenticity can leave their listeners feeling betrayed, can see their radioplay hamstrung, or find their critical reception waning. However, these codes themselves are hotly contested within the genre, and singers sometimes have the ability to position themselves counter to “trends” in authenticity or even attempt to rewrite the code entirely.

These somewhat sterile sounding positions are certainly divorced from the affective weight that “authenticity” carries in the minds of listeners and country music producers. I want to make clear the split between these analytic approaches to authenticity and the emotionally loaded impact of music that, to a listener, feels “authentic.” While I argue that the various attitudes towards authenticity investigated in this thesis collapse into the two functions I’ve just suggested, it’s important to note that for consumers from all over the United States (and the world) “authenticity” still feelingly means. It is perhaps easy to return to the image of me in the car with my dad and feel as though I was somehow immune from the abstracted ideological baggage of country music. But it’s important to remember that the structure of authenticity was already at play in any feeling of wonder at or personal connection to that music - the image itself is already written over with generic stereotype: windows down, dusty road, lessons with dad. This tight mutual constitution is of critical importance for understanding both the formal structure of authenticity in country music and the achingly personal affective stakes of the vernacular musical practice.
Works Cited


The Intertextual Field of Country Music

In Aaron Fox’s 2004 ethnography *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*, he approaches country music people-first by embedding himself in a set of dive bars and beer-joints in Lockhart Texas. Fox focuses on an idea of verbal art - largely manifest in country music - in the working class sociality of this South Texas town in order to better understand the relationships between regional, racial, and class identifiers and popular culture.

A reading of country music as working class culture cannot be isolated from considerations of ideological hegemony working through figures of reified “authenticity” and the commodity form... But working-class country music is also the expressive, stylized, ritualized surface of a deep ocean of popular social experience. I view the significance of country music in Texas working-class culture as complexly shaped by - but ultimately theoretically distinct from - the logics of the music industry or histories of recorded musical style (Fox 2004:21).

Fox’s approach emphasizes the role that country music-as-verbal art plays in the day to day lives of rural, working-class whites, which he sees as critical to understanding their social, political, and economic experience, and as such he intentionally... [deemphasizes] the view of country music as a commercial genre of popular music, explicable in terms of broad patterns and institutions of production and consumption, a recorded canon of songs and performances, or principal actors (especially musical “stars”) on the mass-media stage (2004:31).

Due to the ways that my research is limited to an analysis of mass-mediated commodities and the very canonical “songs and performances” that Fox deemphasizes, I can’t make the same kinds of claims to working-class “culture” or “lifestyle” that he does. However, following Nadine Hubbs (2014), whose cultural studies-informed
Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music treats country music songs as cultural texts and uses them to better understand the specific relationship between working-class and queer ideology in the United States. Rather than putting forward a sweeping analysis of working class culture and “country” people using a handful of songs, I instead intend to limit my analysis to country music songs, interviews with artists, awards show speeches and other mass-mediated elements of the “country music industry” in an attempt to develop a detailed but narrow account of how country music understands itself as a musical genre.

That being said, there are certainly elements of Fox’s analysis that prove incredibly valuable to my own project. In his careful rendering of the sonic texture of his field site, Fox does an excellent job of showing the ways that speech and song exist on a spectrum in working-class contexts (2004:216). This juxtaposition serves to open everyday language to poetic analysis and also gives Fox occasion to make explicit principles behind working class poetics. While Fox treats commercial country songs largely as a kind of shared literary reserve from which working class country music “fans” (though Fox himself is somewhat critical of this term) draw - the literary techniques Fox makes note of are just as useful for analyzing country music songs on their own.

Similarly, ethnographer Kathleen Stewart notes in her The Space on the Side of the Road that a significant part of her research in rural American “coal-country” was a “long, close participation in... ways of talkin’ and ways of doin’ people” (1996:8). She makes clear that local forms of verbal art are not produced through isolation alone, but
also through "a constant scanning for signs" from both national public culture and local practices that include country music, gossip, religion, and politics. She draws on Michael Taussig's concept of "mimetic excess" to describe James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, "in which things are at once naturalized as the real and marked in their very textualization as a cultural construction" (1996:22). Though I focus on the song texts of commercial country music in this chapter, it's important to note that the social practices from which country poetics emerge (and which popular country songs inflect in return) are vitally lived ones that cannot be collapsed into the logic of a commodity-consumer relationship.

One poetic feature of working-class verbal art which Fox notes in the everyday speech of his informants, as well as in country music as commodity and cultural practice, is intertextuality (2004:241). In this section, I intend to draw out examples of intertextuality in commercial country music both inside and outside the "classic country" canon. Additionally, I want to make explicit some of the ways that intertextuality in country music is not limited to text as such, but also includes an important sonic or timbral dimension tied to the sounding voice. Finally, I’d like to explain the role that intertextuality has to play in the production of authenticity within country music with specific attention paid to the assemblage of shared generic history.

When using *intertextuality* here, I am referring to the sense that texts in a field (in this case, country music songs in the "classic country canon") reference and relate to each other. These relationships range from very loose gestures towards a theme or trope to very specific references to physical places, artists, song titles/lyrics or moments
in the past. Country music, according to Fox, “is richly intertextual, comprising an
extraordinary world of objectified discourse and specific rhetorical tropes that stand
vividly apart from the ordinary life country takes as its principle narrative theme” (Fox
2004:241). In country music, themes such as trains, “drinkin’,” “cheatin’,” and “mama
manage to both be vital categories in which new music is produced as well as (very
easy) sources for the production of stereotypes.

Additionally, country music songs are fundamentally narrative. Even so-called
“list songs,” which consist mainly of identifying objects in the immediate environment in
a near Derridean associational slide, are usually tied together by a loose narrative. 
Travis Tritt’s “It’s A Great Day To Be Alive” (a personal favorite of my father) is a key
example. In the first verse, Tritt muses about the “rice cookin’ in the microwave” and a
“three-day beard” he doesn’t plan to shave” among other banalities, but the song itself
holds together as a meditation on the pains and pleasures of solitude. Though narrative
itself has been diversely formulated, for Kathleen Stewart “narrative is first and foremost
a mediating form through which “meaning” must pass. Stories, in other words, are
productive. They catch up cultural conventions, relations of authority, and fundamental
While Stewart is discussing here the conventions of everyday talk in “Other America,”
her point is broadly relevant to stories of all sorts as we will see below. It’s important to
understand country songs as stories because of the primacy of the vocal lyric in the
songwriting process and their later interpretation. The vocal track is very forward in the
mix of almost any country song (though there are a few exceptions), and it’s critical that
the lyrics be intelligible to listeners (a feature which distinguishes country music from other genres such as rock or art song, where the voice is often used as another instrument and lyrics may be incidental, unintelligible or in an uncommonly spoken language).

Since country music songwriting tends to be so focused around a particularly narrow set of themes the criteria for selecting songs with intentionally intertextual references must be more strict than something like: "songs about trucks are related intertextually to other songs about trucks." While the deployment of these tropes can function as important indicators of generic belonging (see my below discussion of David Allan Coe), I'm interested here in the ways that specific references to singers, song title/lyrics, as well as musical impersonations serve to produce authenticity by knitting the performer into a broader musical tradition. While a complete analysis of each and every country song using text scrubbing and statistical analysis is possible, for this study I'm interested in addressing broader rhetorical trends rather than mapping the entire referential field. The texts below exemplify the uses of textual reference and musical impersonations and the ways they serve to index specific texts and establish relationships among performers and past performances.

Name-Dropping Referentiality

The most obvious kind of intertextual reference is the direct quotation of a song lyric or the embedding of an artist's name within another piece of music. The ways that
these references are articulated depend on their particular location within the singer's repertoire and their rhetorical position in the lyric, but they always serve to connect a singer to their influences or related artists. Jamey Johnson's song "Between Jennings and Jones" - released in 2008 on the Mercury reissue of his album That Lonesome Song and co-written by Buddy Cannon - references in its title and chorus two iconic figures in country music: George Jones, perhaps the best singer in the history of country music; and perennial “outlaw” favorite Waylon Jennings - both “hard core” country superstars in the 1970s. Throughout the song, Johnson places himself rhetorically “Between Jennings and Jones” in terms of his own musical sound as well as in terms of the sonic environment of Nashville bars when he writes, "I spent all my nights in some old honky tonk somewhere between Jennings and Jones." Finally, towards the end of Johnson’s narrative, he gets signed to a label in Music City he finds that while his name’s on the album the label won’t let him sing his own songs, since they “Put [his] name on the album but they shelved all [his] songs, said I was somewhere between Jennings and Jones."

In these references, Johnson places himself adjacent musically, affectively, and commercially (in terms of where you can his albums in a record store) to two key figures in country music history. As a “hard core” country music performer who, along with Sturgill Simpson, is often praised online for “saving country music” (from pop/rock crossover oriented sound popular in Nashville), it’s a rather straightforward move for Johnson to reference these country greats - but these kinds of references aren’t always this direct. I’d like to compare two more instances of name dropping references in the
music of Robert Ellis, an emerging country singer whose innovative and genre-defying music has earned him positive critical reception; and Hootie and the Blowfish, a popular 1990s American rock band whose lead singer Darius Rucker has made a recent and largely successful bid for a solo career in country music.

“Comin’ Home” from Ellis’ second album *Photographs*, sounds like straightforward honky tonk. The themes are traditional, with a narrative that meditates on absence and the hope of return to home. The instrumentation as well fits the more or less standardized honky tonk model (drums, bass, with electric, acoustic, and pedal steel guitars) that wouldn’t be out of place in any of Aaron Fox’s beer joints. Ellis divides *Photographs* in two sides, one “A-side” dedicate to his folk and jazz influences and the other “B-side” to his favorite country acts (stage patter in Harrisburg, PA 2014). “Comin’ Home” is decidedly a B-side in the album. In the chorus, describing his time on the lonesome road, he sings “I’ve got Lefty, Willie, Hank, and Towns to keep me company,” a quick reference to country and Americana songwriters Lefty Frizzell, Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, and as many as three different Hank Williams. The temporal and stylistic breadth of these characters seems to indicate that Ellis’ approach here is to “show is his work,” by making his musical influences explicit. However, in the context of the album’s overall division and the broader trajectory of Ellis’ oeuvre, his ambivalence towards the genre, and his marginality in terms of the broader country music scene, make the overt honky tonk feel of “Comin’ Home” and this referentially act feel more like a bid for inclusion in a broader canon, as well as a claim to insider knowledge of country music. While Willie Nelson and all three Hank Williams’ are absolute megastars in the
genre, Townes Van Zandt has been described as a “cult musician” and “a songwriter’s songwriter” (i.e. commercially unpopular), and despite Lefty Frizzell’s immeasurable influence on country singing he remains far from a household name even among country music fans.

While Ellis’ references work to knit him deeper into the intertextual world of country music that he finds himself on the border of, this kind of name dropping doesn’t always function this way. Hootie and the Blowfish’s 2005 release *Looking for Lucky*, doesn’t “count” as country music - it wasn’t marketed that way and the songwriting and the instrumentation and songwriting but it squarely in pop-rock territory. However, in a moderately favorable review published in Slant Magazine, Jonathan Keefe notes that what turned out to be the band’s final outing has moments that wouldn’t sound out of place on a Shooter Jennings record, indicating some affinity between Hootie and country music. “Leaving,” as Keefe notes, is really just a bluegrass-country crossover song - and throughout the album it’s clear that Darius Rucker’s “baritone has acquired some ragged edges over the years that complement the most accomplished set of songs he’s ever sung.” Keefe very astutely anticipates Rucker’s immanent move to country music, which took place in 2008 when he signed with Capitol Records Nashville and made his debut at the Grand Ole Opry. Even in light of this career shift, I don’t think that *Looking for Lucky* can be properly described as a “country music album” but, following Keefe’s review, it is reasonable to approach tracks on the record with an ear towards country poetics.
For example, one line in "Get Out of My Mind" from *Looking for Lucky* demonstrates the use of name dropping references to "lasso" an artist in a different genre and loop them into the singer's own textual world. "Get Out of My Mind" is a prime example. The song's narrative follows a singer who finds himself in love with a woman who "fills up his soul" and "does everything to make him whole," but wakes to find that it was all a dream, that she in fact "left him for another man," leading our narrator to turn to drinking in a moment of desperation (I think this gloss of the narrative clearly justifies my treatment of particular track as country music). At this final stage in the narrative, as Rucker's narrator turns to the bottle, he sings "I put on Lauryn [Hill] and I drink alone." In the scene, Lauryn Hill comes in metonymically through her voice to keep Rucker company in his time of need - but by selecting Hill, rather than any country music singer, Rucker invokes a more genre-bent world, where the extended canon of acceptable referential texts and influences can include R&B singers. In a sense, he's also producing a country music world amenable to the full participation and inclusion of black singers like himself - a project which he's continued quite successfully in his own solo career.

Family Tradition

A final example of this kind of name dropping technique comes from veritable country music royalty, the Williams family. Hank Williams Sr., treated by Peterson as a singer who "personified country music authenticity and was a model for those who
followed” (173:1997), is more than country royalty, he’s very nearly a deity and references to him are imbued with a particular sanctity, especially in the context of “hard core” country music. With a father like Hank Williams, the careers of his son (Hank Jr.) and grandchildren (Hank III and Holly Williams) were laid out before them. Both Hank Jr. and Hank III use frequent name dropping references to both the Williams patriarch and other hard-country contemporaries in order to mark their proximity to, as well as distance from, the country music traditions instantiated by Hank Senior. This writerly practice is evident in both the 1979 Hank Jr. track “Family Tradition” and Hank Ill’s 2006 “Country Heroes,” analyzed below. Interestingly, Holly Williams’ music is largely absent references to any of the Hanks, references to parents index generic figures, the prototypical mother or father rather than her particular celebrity parentage. Holly William’s refusal to take up her father and grandfather’s mantle seems rooted in a desire for independence. While she acknowledges that she “could’ve called a record company and said, 'Find me 10 hits,’” she’s personally invested in writing music that doesn’t conform to the strict generic demands of country music (Schimmel 2013). As such, Holly Williams is not eager to label her music generically, and says in an interview on her website that “however people want to interpret this sound is fine by me” (www.hollywilliams.com).

In “Family Tradition,” written in 1979 by Hank Williams Jr., the country music tradition is figured as explicitly genealogical - “country music singers” are a “real close family.” But due to a then-unpopular rock/honky-tonk oriented sound and hard-partying lifestyle “some of [William’s] kinfolks have disowned a few others and [himself].”
Williams Jr. refers to his father, in this case the specific country-cosmological father figure or Hank Williams Sr., and insists that he’s “very proud of [his] daddy’s name” - but simultaneously asserts a desirable distance between his father and himself by qualifying the above with a reminder that “[Sr.’s] kind of music and [Jr.’s] ain’t exactly the same.”

Lyrically, it’s clear that Jr. is making a clear claim to distance from the “family” of country music - a distance that’s partially self-imposed. In Hank Williams Ill’s 2006 “Country Heroes,” he mobilizes a homologous (but notably denser) citational style to establish a similar relationship between himself and his country music predecessors. In “Country Heroes,” the referents aren’t figured genealogically, but are understood as intoxicating consumables. Ill “drinks” George Jones and David Allan Coe, among other singers who are “keeping [him] from home” or “easing [his] misery.” In this chorus there’s one reference to a Hank [Williams], but the referent could be either Hank Sr. (Ill’s grandfather) or Hank Jr. (his father). While Ill doesn’t announce the distance from the country music lineage as Jr. does in “Family Tradition,” the ambiguity of Ill’s reference to “Hank” serves to confuse his musico-historical position. His more “old-fashioned” musical style is reminiscent of Hank Sr. and other early country stars of the 1950s, but other songs on the album Straight to Hell have titles like “Pills I Took” and “Dick In Dixie” which mark him as an “outlaw” country singer due to their explicit content.

Taken together, these songs are explicit examples of a specific citational technique that mobilizes popular figures from country music’s past in order to stake a claim to authenticity rooted in a particular closeness to or familiarity with generic history. This claim staking can look like a strict adherence to originary structure (Hank Ill’s
retro-styled musical practice - at least on his country recordings - can be read as trafficking in a kind of etiological authenticity) or like deviance from popular contemporary form (Hank Jr.'s insistence that his music "ain't exactly the same" as his father's indicates a deployment of moral authenticity). Regardless, for both Hanks Jr. and III, their citation of Hank Sr. constitutes an authenticity practice that instantiates almost literally the genealogical notion of country music history and serves to position both singers within the genre.

The Rhinestone Cowboy

At the close of this section, I'd like to take some time to discuss one of country music's most notorious stars - David Allan Coe. One of the most enigmatic figures in country history, the "Rhinestone Cowboy" as he is sometimes called (and often calls himself) has had a long, industrious, and ambiguous career since his release from prison in 1967 (where he had been incarcerated for much prior two decades). While I won't go as far as to say that Coe is the greatest country recording artist, there is perhaps no other musician that so reveled in the linguistic game of country music. The three tracks analyzed here - some of his most popular recordings: "The Ride," "You Never Even Called Me By My Name," and "Longhaired Redneck" - participate in the poetic tradition that I've outlined thus far while also cleverly subverting country music tropes in the process.
Before we proceed, it's important to make two caveats. The first and simplest is that David Allan Coe did not write all of his songs, and in fact only wrote one of the two discussed here. This practice is exceedingly common in country (as well as other popular genres), however this trend is at odds with the popular understanding of country music songs as being to some extent autobiographical. Of course almost no country singer could survive “livin' out all the songs that they wrote,” but the very presence of a country songwriting industry troubles nearly any claim to moral authenticity by popular singers - which is rooted in “being yourself,” perhaps the polar opposite of singing “someone else’s song.” That said, both songs covered here not written by Coe were written explicitly for him (and, at least in the case of “You Never Even Called Me By My Name,” taking into account his explicit feedback). As such, and due to the common practice of attributing songs to their recording artists rather than songwriters, I contend that it’s fair to call these songs rightly Coe's.

The second caveat is more expressly preventive. I want to make clear that while these songs represent to my mind some of the best of David Allan Coe’s output - and some of the best country music has to offer - they were selected for their utility in making sense of country music's production of an intertextual world. Moreover, while any thorough account of David Allan Coe’s life or works handles his more problematic experience - specifically, his albums Nothing Sacred and Underground Album - songs from which have been called “among the most racist, misogynist, homophobic and obscene songs recorded by a popular songwriter” (Strauss 2000). This section is not intended as a David Allan Coe hagiography, and is certainly not an endorsement of his
“underground” material or his politics or prejudices - but to ignore his output especially given its obvious application here would be both intellectually dishonest and irresponsible.

I'll begin with a look at the 1983 recording of “The Ride” by David Allan Coe, written by Gary Gentry and J.B. Detterline Jr. The song's narrative centers on the ghostly apparition of Hank Williams Sr., who shows up in the narrator's life to drive him from Montgomery, Alabama to Nashville, Tennessee. While the name of this specter is only revealed in the song's final verse -- when he exits the “antique Cadillac,” the narrator thanks the stranger, calling him “mister.” The ghost replies, “You don't have to call me mister, mister/the whole world calls me Hank” -- there are several clues to the stranger's identity and ghostly nature earlier in the song. The figure is “ghost white pale” and “dressed like 1950,” clear indicators of his status as a specter. His taste in music (“solid country gold”), sobriety (“half-drunk and hollow eyed”), and the particular car the stranger was travelling in (the “antique Cadillac” in question is likely intended to be the Cadillac in which Hank Sr. died in 1953, currently housed at the Hank Williams Museum in Montgomery) all point to Hank Sr. By embedding this kind of country music trivia in the song's lyrics, the writers reward listeners with knowledge of generic history with the pleasure of “solving the puzzle.” Building songs around trivia or references to other song lyrics or titles is a common practice and challenge for country songwriters (Fox 2004:242), and “The Ride” is a prime example. Additionally, “The Ride” functions as a country music ghost story. Anthropologists have noted that in ghost stories “haunting often represents a return of some sort, with ghosts coming back to attend to unfinished
business, or because the wrongs done to them have not been redressed" (Holloway and Keale 2008:299). This seems to be the case in “The Ride,” and the unfinished business in question (driving the narrator out of Alabama obscurity and into the center of the country music universe) serves to position David Allan Coe himself in an exceedingly privileged position as the immediate recipient of Hank Sr.’s patrimony.

The song “Longhaired Redneck,” written by Coe and released in 1976 as the A-side to his hit “Would You Lay With Me?,” features a complicated lyrical/vocal reference to three other country singers. In the refrain of “Longhaired Redneck,” Coe performs convincing impressions of the singers along with lyrics that reference their recordings. For the ‘Texas Troubadour’ Ernest Tubb Coe sings “I can sing all them songs about Texas” in an apparent allusion to Tubb’s song “Waltz Across Texas.” Coe then speak-sings the line “I still do all the sad ones that I know” in a hysterical parody of “Whispering” Bill Anderson (see Anderson’s song “Still,” which consists largely of whispered interludes). Coe’s final target is Merle Haggard (who was a gifted impressionist in his own right), whose characteristic nasal drawl accompanies the line “They tell me, I look like Merle Haggard.” Coe concludes the refrain with a self-deprecating joke about himself, finishing the sentence “They tell me I look like Merle Haggard” with “and sound a lot like David Allan Coe” sung in his own voice. There’s a kind of complicated double logic to these references, which (as with Hank Williams Jr. above) serve to both establish a referential closeness and perform a bid into country music history. At the same time, by mocking Nashville superstars like Tubb and Anderson (along with, to a lesser extent, Merle Haggard), Coe’s impersonations have
the effect of producing a desirable distance from them. In these impersonations Coe manages to balance the establishment of generic bona fides and his own identity as a hard-rocking country “outlaw.”

Finally, I’d like to turn my attention to “You Never Even Call Me By My Name,” which is perhaps Coe’s most widely popular song. Written by Steve Goodman and John Prine and recorded by Coe in 1975, the song “correctly identifies a fundamental quality of good country songwriting, which is a delight in working within sever formal and thematic limits, producing a tightly woven texture of phrase, figures, images, and gestures (Fox 2004:242). The song describes the experience of never being truly known by a lover, an employer, by fans or colleagues. The narrator laments that “the only time [he knows] [he’ll] hear ‘David Allan Coe’ is when Jesus has his Final Judgment day.” The song is famous for a lengthy meta-musical joke wherein Coe announces in plain speech that the song was written by Steve Goodman who claimed it was “the perfect country and western song.” Coe disagreed on the grounds that the song “hadn’t said anything at all about mama, or trains, or trucks, or prison, or getting’ drunk.” Coe then tells the listener that Goodman wrote another verse including all those elements and, as such, the song now constitutes a “perfect country and western song.” He then closes the recording by singing that new verse.

Taken together, these three songs demonstrate Coe’s willingness to revel in the cliche and stereotype of country music performance. The manipulation of country music history and the genre’s own intertextual field is a poetic challenge as well as a bid for inclusion within the fold. And, for Coe and other “outlaws,” a way of marking their
distance from the Nashville “in crowd.” As Aaron Fox writes, “it’s not particular “trains” or “mamas” that make country songs “perfect.” It’s the intertextual presence of “mamas” and “trains” as tropes” (2004:242). Through a creative rearticulation of these tropes, as well as vocal impersonations and citational songwriting, musicians imbricate themselves in a genre rich with internal reference and inside jokes. These carefully wrought songs demonstrate Stewart’s notion of “foolin’ with thangs,” a process of bricolage, reconstruction, or “re-membering” where “the sutures between old and new, or one thing and another, are left visible rather than smoothed and painted over” (1996:44).

Importantly, the poetic conventions of country music songwriting do not exist in some kind of extra-cultural vacuum. Fox argues that country songs ought to be seen as the “apotheosis of working-class verbal art” (2004:248), which has a mutually constitutive relationship with “ordinary” everyday language. “Tropes,” such as Coe’s mamas and trucks, “are... returned to the domain of everyday discourse via effective musical performance... and via the probing deployment of song’s tropes in the flow of stage patter and sociable talk” (2004:248). Referencing popular country songs and improvising socially-relevant lyrics to existing music are typical of conversational style in my rural hometown - and this somewhat dense referentiality can be as dislocating and alienating to cultural/ intellectual elites as highfalutin language clogged with academic jargon can be to my working-class friends. Fox notes that “[Johnny] Cash imitations are a standard part of rural working-class humor” and are also “ubiquitous in working-class verbal art and musical performance” (2004:311). Even the most stylized and dramatic reference, the vocal impersonation, is just as common in everyday language as it is on
country records. Moreover, determining "which came first" in this context is a challenge because of this circular relationship between country songwriting and regular talk. Regardless, the import of familiarity with the country music genre and the desirability of recognizing when a phrase or fragment "could be a song" is a key part of rural, working-class language and socialization.

Wrapping Up

Throughout this chapter, I've paid attention to country songs themselves in an attempt to better understand the textual and historical world inhabited by singers and their words. The primacy of the lyric in country music is a major feature of the genre and can be read in the sonic texture of most country music by how "forward" the lead vocal is in the musical mix. It's important to the genre that the words to a country song can be clearly understood, and this quality is part of what makes country music "country." While there are a few exceptions, the "meaning" of country songs obtains in the words to the songs themselves. The negotiation of authenticity and generic history then takes place largely within the textual space of country lyrics, though it's also important to note that other gestures that stake claims to authenticity at the level of the song are extra-textual (vocal impressions, for example, or "traditional" instrumentation). The citation of important "country heroes" in a song can position an artist within a musical or sub-generic lineage. In country music, the possession of an "authentic" voice is as much a lyrical/writerly decision as it is the outcome of a particular sonic socialization, through
the practice of musical impressions, within the genre. In the following chapter I abstract a level to look at country music as a genre and as a result shift my focus away from the interpretation of specific songs and instead at the social world of performers and professional organizations. It's important to note that the genre of country music and individual country music songs are mutually constitutive. While in some ways these songs in their multiplicity can be said to “make up” the broader genre, at the same time, these country songs wouldn’t and couldn’t exist outside of the broader cultural-industrial framework of country music.
Works Cited


Genre Defense and Genre Deviance

In the title of this thesis, I refer to country music as "America’s most popular genre," a claim that’s increasingly challenging to back up numerically as pop music marks larger and larger shares of listeners and as radio listenership decreases -- country music hasn’t been the most popular radio format since 2008, though it remained the most popular “current-driven music format” until recently (Reuters 2008, MarketingCharts 2016). However, thanks to a pun on the multiple meanings of the word "popular," the claim may still stand culturally. Country music is “of the people” in the sense that it features the most consistent class-critique of any American musical genre by both criticising the “coastal elite” and celebrating the lives of common people in all its richness. At the heart of this chapter is another pun - that between gender and genre. Anglophones get both words from Old French, but they have their roots in the Latin genus meaning “race, stock, family; kind, rank, order; species.” In English, gender seems to have largely lost its taxonomic and scientistic connotation. Genre, on the other hand, has only doubled down, with one sound engineer and self-proclaimed “data alchemist” Glenn McDonald currently listing 1,496 distinct genres of music on his interactive genre map “Every Noise at Once.”

While the musicological project of tracking in detail the subtleties and nuances of particular subgenres of country music is an interesting one, for the purposes of this project I’m more invested in understanding the ways that the particular label of “country

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2 Online Etymology Dictionary, "Genre" - Douglas Harper
3 Every Noise at Once - http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html
music" itself is negotiated. In this chapter, I will attempt to use theories of performativity and style from Judith Butler and Dick Hebdige to discuss the relationship between authenticity and genre. At this level some of the most pressing issues in my broader analysis emerge, especially as regards the ways in which authenticity as capital can serve to extend the sphere of acceptable actions by performers. Following Butler, and by taking seriously her argument that performativity is "that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains," I hope to use her expanded approach to perlocutionary acts to talk about "country" along the same lines as Butler talks about "gender."

Throughout the chapter I'll be making recourse to a few recent events in country music that serve to demonstrate the kinds of posturing that take place around authenticity in country music as a genre, as well as. I'll start with debates about proper ways of paying tribute to country music legends - an ACM Merle Haggard Spirit Award, and a tribute album to Hank Williams that consists of musicians recording songs based on lyrics to unfinished songs. Then I'll move on to the label of "country" music itself and examine performers who have rejected it in favor of alternative generic branding; as well as artists who have taken up the mantle and performative conventions of country music as comedians in order to skewer it. I'll conclude with an example of an artist (Taylor Swift) who was excommunicated from country radio for stylistic changes that she couldn't "afford," in other words wasn't "authentic" enough to pull off.

PERFORMATIVITY, STYLE, and AUTHENTICITY

In a 2010 piece of reportage in the New Yorker on country balladeer and guitar hero Brad Paisley, Kelefa Sanneh lingers on one element of Paisley’s stage show and persona in particular - his dedication to a trademark cowboy hat. At the start of his career, record executives cautioned Paisley against becoming a “hat guy” because the look was associated with, in Paisley’s own words, “cookie-cutter, wannabe people.” However, Paisley stuck with the look as it “was visual proof of his commitment to the genre’s history, and to its fans.” From this example, it’s clear that the hat itself lacks any intrinsic meaning - the relationship between signifier and signified is not only arbitrary, but multiple and contested. Cowboy costume, including the hat, has been part of country music’s nostalgic looking back since the genre’s emergence. While, as Bill Malone notes, “the cowboy contributed nothing to American music” he did add the “fabric of usable symbols which surrounded him” (1985:52). Since the 1920s, cowboy costume popularity has waxed and waned - and, since Paisley began his career at the tail end of the 1990s line dance boom, hats had come back in a big way. Record executives, worried about skeptical country fans tired of cowboy-hatted “wannabes,” saw the hat as a commercial liability precisely because of it’s potential to be read as inauthentic. Better, it seems, to go hatless than risk being read as a fake. On the other hand, Paisley’s devotion to the hat is about more than a personal admiration of a particular look and can be read as an attempt to recuperate the history of the cowboy hat-as-sign.
This hat obsession is complicated by another of Paisley’s trademarks, this one an element of his stage show rather than personal performance. Sannah notes that, “[Paisely] gives at least one hat away during every show” and as such “requires a constant supply of perfect hats” so as to both provide his fans as many hats as he is moved and to stay constantly hatted himself. This nearly paranoid multiplicity of hats (at one point, Paisley’s manager soothes our superstar that “Stetson is supposed to have the cowboy-hat crisis solved by tonight”) doesn’t only underline the importance of these hats to Paisley’s stage-show, but also indicates the extent to which the cowboy hat remains a fraught element of Paisley’s identification as an artist. As the excesses of homophobic violence and anti-flag burning legislation are clues to the actual fragility of, respectively, hetero-masculine supremacy and patriotism; the comical excess of these cowboy hats and the regularity with which they are distributed to an expectant audience is a clue to the actual fragility of this performance of authenticity.

This image from Brad Paisley’s tour offers us salient examples of many of the relevant understandings of performativity and style - as well as the ways that these concepts play out with regards to authenticity. Excess, performativity, perlocution, and the semiotics of style all work together to produce an artist’s image - which can be read as authentic or inauthentic, with often dire commercial and aesthetic consequences. Dick Hebdige notes that academics in cultural studies ought to be “intrigued by the most mundane objects” which “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile” (1979:2). The mundanity of objects like cowboy hats, certain shirts, or kinds of guitars may belie their symbolic and performative work.
Reading seemingly unimportant stylistic decisions in terms of dress or performance can help us to reveal “the tension between dominant and subordinate groups” and reveal the “double meanings” of country music ‘material culture’ (Hebdige 1979:2).

Moreover, the meanings of these mundane objects (and the ways that their meanings are “doubled”) can also help to elucidate diachronic changes in (sub)cultural meaning. In Hebdige’s study of British punk rock subculture shows how multiple meanings accumulate and change over time.

The [teddy boy] revival [of the late 1970’s] recalled a time which seemed surprisingly remote [the 1950s], and by comparison secure; almost idyllic in its stolid puritanism, its sense of values, its conviction that the future could be better. Freed from time and context, these latter-day teds could be allowed to float past innocent pretenders on the wave of 1970s nostalgia... (Hebdige 1979:82).

The attention paid to this revival and rearticulation of the teddy boy subculture calls to mind Peterson’s dialectical conception of “hard-core” and “soft-shell” country music - but also serves as a reminder that even nostalgic or revivalist (sub)cultural forms are “responses to specific historical conditions, formulated in completely different ideological atmospheres” (1979:82). Brad Paisley’s cowboy hat, and cowboy hats on the heads of numerous country singers before him, signals differently depending on its context.

Similarly, generic changes within country music never emerge whole cloth and in fact come into existence as a result of particular actors - musicians, promoters, songwriters - articulating their own baggage, preferences, and desires in and through the
already-existing generic conventions. Country music “culture” or generic history both forms and is formed by defense and deviance from the genre’s “norm.”

If, as Dick Hebdige suggests, “subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound)” (1979:90) - I wonder about the ways that the derogatory label of “noise” is leveled at popular genres such as pop and rap from within country music “culture” (that is, by country music fans). By producing other genres a “subcultural” via the rhetorical deployment of “noise” country music is reasserted as hegemonic, normative, and the patrimony of “real Americans.” Country music is almost always (and especially in its most popular forms) incredibly square and almost never unselfconscious. The reactionary deployment of “noise” as a retrenchment into not only specific generic conventions but into a set of traditionalistic values systems coded in country music (patriotism, self-reliance, etc.) is interesting with regards to the aesthetic relationship between country music and national politics (addressed in more detail in the following chapter), but also in terms of the claims that certain kinds of country music (pop country, country rap, and even mainstream country radio hits coming out of Music Row in Nashville) are “less-country” or “not-country” because of their real or imagined similarity to pop or hip-hop. In this way, the implied label of “noise” serves to signal the outgroup and reify the in-group, even if the in-group in question is in fact marginal vis-a-vis the broader picture of country music (for example, the Texas-based “red dirt” subgenre).
PAYING TRIBUTE

This section focuses on the ways that the country music genre is policed by artists and critics who make claims to authenticity and generic history. As we saw in the previous chapter, which focused on the intertextual network of citations that forms the literary loam for country music, the genre overall is preoccupied with its own literary and social history. In the Paisley example above, the performer’s specific commitment to a particular style is a component of his commitment to the genre’s history and fans. Questions about “the right way” to honor artists or to nurture their legacies are a particularly fraught opportunity to police both the lineage of country music (in terms of what constitutes acceptable reference/what is “canon”) and its contemporary form.

On 29 August 2016, the Academy of Country Music (founded in 1964 in Los Angeles, CA “to promote country music in the western 13 states and to support artists based on the West Coast”) announced the introduction of the “Merle Haggard Spirit Award,” intended to recognize the “the uncompromising integrity and steadfastness of spirit embodied by the late Merle Haggard” - a country legend who had died shortly before. Three days later, and before the winner was announced, the then up-and-coming Sturgill Simpson took to Facebook to voice his displeasure. Simpson, himself a relative outsider with a genre-bending sound inflected by rock and soul, tells quite the story in the full text of his post - and includes as targets not only the ACM, but the Nashville country music establishment and (of all things) Garden & Gun magazine in his tirade. However, the substance of his argument boils down to this:
If the ACM wants to actually celebrate the legacy and music of Merle Haggard, they should drop all the formulaic cannon fodder bullshit they’ve been pumping down rural America’s throat for the last 30 years along with all the high school pageantry, meat parade award show bullshit and start dedicating their programs to more actual Country Music.

What Simpson means by “actual Country Music” is neither the pop-oriented Nashville glitz or a rehashing of “country gold” from the middle of the last century. Instead, he’s invested in music that has an independent “spirit” that’s willing to “take risks.” Here, Simpson articulates a position rooted in an understanding of moral authenticity where “authentic” actors follow their inner “spirit” rather than conforming to a popular style or reproducing a specific body of work. His critique of the country music mainstream (which, for Simpson seems predicated on the metonymy of Nashville with mainstream country radio - seemingly disregarding entirely that the ACM is based in Los Angeles) is that, as he made explicit in an update to his post after it went viral, promotional organizations like the ACM “don’t walk it like they talk it.”

Of course, Simpson’s somewhat inflammatory claims didn’t go unquestioned, concerning as they do both one of the largest organizations and one of the most massive stars in country music. By that Friday, David Cantwell (music critic and author of Merle Haggard’s biography, Merle Haggard: The Running Kind) had published his riposte. Cantwell indicates that Simpson’s comments follow a familiar pattern - painting country audiences as dupes, a “militant opposition” between country music that gets radio play and what Simpson calls “actual country music,” a complaint that music like Simpson’s hasn’t been played on country radio with the simultaneous grumble that he doesn’t really care anyway (Cantwell 2016). These sentiments are, for Cantwell, a kind
of complaining that have their own particular history within the genre. As he says, “The times they are a-changin’, but the sneer remains the same.”

Clearly, Cantwell takes issue with Simpson’s approach, but makes explicit that both he and Simpson have a “desire to honor Merle Haggard” and want “to help ensure that Merle Haggard remains important to country music even after his death.” The substantive difference between the two then, is not so much that one thinks honoring Haggard’s legacy is unimportant and the other doesn’t - but rather that their visions of authenticity and subsequent memorial strategies are out of sync. While Simpson emphasizes moral authenticity and a specific commitment to the attitude and ethos behind Haggard’s innovative songwriting, Cantwell leans on a kind of type authenticity which hinges on the reproduction of specific song-texts by contemporary musicians. We can see this in both the memorial moves that he champions and those he disparages. Imitation is, for Cantwell, not only the highest form of flattery but also the proper way to propagate tradition. Using the tribute albums that Merle Haggard himself produced of his own idols including fiddler Bob Wills and “The Singing Brakeman” Jimmie Rodgers (as well as Haggard’s frequent on-stage impersonations of his contemporaries like Johnny Cash, Buck Owens, and Hank Snow), Cantwell cites tribute albums to Haggard by contemporary singers as carrying on the tradition of tradition-making that he sees as crucial to the survival of the genre.

While he acknowledges that most of the Haggard tribute albums that he favors won’t see any radio play, Cantwell seems convinced that an update to Haggard’s sound

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5 At the same time, Cantwell chides Simpson for “making headlines... with his cover of a Nirvana song” and closes by taking it “on faith that Sturgill Simpson’s Merle Haggard tribute album... will be forthcoming”
is necessary to “get Haggard’s songs into the ears and the lives of a larger, younger contemporary country audience,” it’s unclear what that update might look like. In fact, Cantwell closes his piece with a cell phone recording of Miranda Lambert (the actual winner of the Merle Haggard Spirit Award, even if the bulk of the publicity went to Sturgill Simpson) performing an acoustic tribute to Merle Haggard with a cover of his meditative ballad “The Way I Am.” The embedded video follows immediately Cantwell’s wish that “Miranda Lambert will back up her Merle Haggard Spirit Award by including a 2016-sounding version of a favorite Merle song on her next album,” as if this particular cover would instantiate the sort of “updated” sound he’s looking for. Lambert’s cover is incredibly faithful to the original, replicating almost note-for-note Haggard’s recorded version. While her version might qualify as “authentic” in Cantwell’s sense of reproducing specific song-texts, it doesn’t sound like anything that would get much popular country radio play in 2016. If the cover sounds “modern” it’s because of Haggard’s timeless songwriting rather than any modifications made in Lambert’s arrangement. She performs the piece alone on stage with a guitar, and her stripped-back approach (while touching) plays with none of the arena-rock or pop influences that constitute many contemporary country hits.

This description of a contemporary country music controversy makes clear are the stakes and the sites of the struggle for generic definition and preservation. Simpson’s focus on new music and an expanding set of acceptable intertextual references draws on an understanding of moral authenticity, but somewhat counterintuitively plays out in the realm of industry awards shows (though it quickly
spreads to most of the country music “culture industry”). On the other hand, Cantwell’s rather conservative retrenchment into type authenticity stresses the importance of particular song-texts and specific voices, and registers at the level of recorded albums and radio plays. Despite their different valences, both are making claims to what country music “really” is or ought to be - claims that are obviously interested. It’s no accident that the alt-country/rock-fusion songwriter is advocating for a looser generic definition based on attitude, while the biographer of a country legend has taken it upon himself to advocate for more tribute albums for that country legend.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

In this section, I hope to make clear the ways that the generic label of “country” can be applied in different contexts and with different effects. This demonstrates not only the malleability of the label itself, but also the different sorts of impact that can be made by artists claiming or distancing themselves from the label. At issue here is, by way of example, the artist Dale Watson - impresario of a genre (which he insists is not country) called “ameripolitan,” and for which he’s organized his own awards show separate from conventional industry awards.

In a 2013 documentary on country-rock superstar and current host on the TV show The Voice, subject Blake Shelton stirred up a controversy that would dog him throughout the year. According to Shelton:
Country music has to evolve in order to survive. Nobody wants to listen to their
grandpa's music, and I don't care how many of these old farts around Nashville
going, 'My God, that ain't country.' Well, that's because you don't buy records
anymore, jackass. The kids do, and they don't want to buy the music that you
were buying (Margasak 2013).

Classic country old guard Ray Price took umbrage at this, and Dale Watson - a nearer
contemporary of Shelton's responded in a song called "A Song For Blake Shelton,"
which includes the line "I'd rather be an old fart than a new country turd." The timing
was a professional boon for Watson, who was at the time just starting to promote his
own splinter sub-genre called "Ameripolitan," which consists of music for the "old farts
and jackasses" skewered by Shelton. While Ray Price eventual personally accepted
Shelton's apology (Saving Country Music 2013), Watson has continued to hold a
grudge and made explicit his split from country music on a 2015 appearance at KEXP
Radio in Seattle.

On the program Watson describes his music: "Ameripolitan is a kind of genre that
we help jump start with the help of Ray Price [after the Shelton controversy]." Watson
continues with a list of included subgenres, letting listeners know that Ameripolitan
music, "honky-tonk, western swing, rockabilly, and outlaw. That's. It. They’re the most
ignored categories of music in the mainstream, especially since Nashville vocally said
that nobody cares about that stuff except for old farts and jackasses." He also reminds

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gt9fqKG-oil.
listeners that the Ameripolitan Awards show is immanent, to be held on February 16, 2016 (the session was recorded on October 9, 2015).

Later in the appearance, in response to the radio DJ bragging about having “some serious country western going on here tonight,” Watson nearly explodes:

Aahhh - Ameripolitan music! [In an announcer voice] You’re listening to Ameripolitan music, we have four categories honky-tonk, western swing, rockabilly, and outlaw music and that’s Ameripolitan music. It is no longer, uh, we are no longer country music. I do not like country music. I am no part of it, it is nothing to do with me. I am Ameripolitan music. Ameripolitan music is Ray Price, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, Bob Wills, Carl Perkins... [all self-identified country singers]."

The DJ quickly changes subjects, “... that’s a beautiful ah, guitar you got there...”

Watson’s staunch commitment to his split from country music and simultaneous reverence for early country music figures is indicative of the instability of these kinds of claims to generic identity and authenticity. Watson’s etiological formulation of authenticity entails an adherence to the ways “things have been” and resists formal deviance - even when that means making a less-than-gracious departure from the genre itself and starting his own awards show. Later in the interview, a guest asks about Watson’s stint in the Grand Ol Opry. Watson is hesitant to reply but says “even though I proclaim that I am no longer part of country music - I’m NOT - I think the opry has got that... i just have a lot of respect for the opry. It’s changed over the years but they’re toleratin’ me right now.” The Opry may be “just tolerating” Watson, but if Watson didn’t
fulfill some kind of generic role or conform enough to their expectations for performers then they simply wouldn’t hire him. If the Opry could fire Hank Williams, they can fire anyone. Introducing his song, “Call Me Insane” on KEXP, Watson gives that classic definition of insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result... I’ve been married four times so I know what I’m talking about.” I can’t help but wonder at the “insanity” of Watson’s quixotic formal retrenchment.

SAYING GOODBYE

This section focuses on the role of authenticity in discussions of an artist - specifically Taylor Swift - leaving country music. The issue of crossover artists (or even stars who break the mold now and then) is a perennial one in country music. Even superstars in country music can fall victim to the vicissitudes of authenticity-minded country audiences, as we’ll see in this section. Garth Brooks - the best selling country musician of all time - released a soft-rock album under the pseudonym “Chris Gaines” to near universal derision and, following the reading of ethnomusicologist Heather MacLachlan, his career took a critical (if not commercial) hit from which it has not really recovered (MacLachlan 2008). While Brooks’ experiment was lauded by his most fervent fans, both proponents and detractors of The Chris Gaines Experience “were in agreement about one fundamental issue; they shared the conviction that country music and rock (or pop) music are two separate genres, and that moving between these genres is remarkable, if not problematic“ (2008:207).
Perhaps more telling than these extra-generic flirtations are the instances of artists essentially excommunicated by the country music establishment and country radio especially. I want to be careful to delineate the exit made by Swift around the release of her album 1989 from that forced on the Dixie Chicks in 2003 or Beyonce’s failure to be nominated for any awards for the ostensibly “country” song “Daddy Lessons” from her 2016 album Lemonade. For Swift, her alienation from the heart of country music was the result of generic deviation beyond acceptable bounds. Her sound had changed markedly enough to warrant exclusion (though not without pejorative commentary based on her gender and age). As we’ll see in the next chapter, the Dixie Chicks excommunication was explicitly non-musical, their exclusion was predicated on their stance against the Iraq war. Beyonce’s failure to be nominated for the critical and commercial brilliant “Daddy Lessons,” I would argue can be identified as a consequence of both right-nationalist hegemony in country music, as well as the musico-racial segregation of “hillbilly” and “race” records that - as Nadine Hubbs points out in Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music (2014:70) - have been around since the dawn of recorded music. These exclusions are more clearly examples of the broader relationship between country music and nationalist politics, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Taylor Swift moved to Nashville from her hometown Reading, PA in 2003 in order to pursue a career in country music. While she was only 14 years old at the time, Swift quickly made a name for herself. She signed with Big Machine Records and released her first album (the eponymous Taylor Swift) in 2006. From her earliest country
recordings, Swift found enormous commercial success, critical shrugs, and “country-bro” (a term for “classic country” fans with implications of rockist and sexist musical biases) resentment. Topping the charts with singles from all of her records since her 2006 eponymous debut, Swift made full album releases every other year from 2006 to the 2014 release of her first self-described and marketed “pop” album 1989. Swift’s meteoric rise to fame and numerous crossover hits made her a country music favorite and boosted country radio listenership - but critics believed, as we’ll see below, that her pop-oriented sound would have a pollutant effect on an already broad genre.

As Travis Stimeling notes in his chapter on Taylor Swift’s “pitch problem” in Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music, Swift has spent much of her own career battling criticism from the “hard shell” side of the country music dialectic, who seem to resent her music’s pop-orientation despite the boost to listenership these hits provide. According to Stimeling - when Swift sounds flawless on a record it’s understood by country-bro critics to be the product of pitch correction technology that compromises her “authenticity;” and when she sings out of tune at a live performance it’s seen as proof that those same critics were right all along, that she is in fact a talentless little girl. Stimeling is quick to point out the ways that these critiques are part of a broader sexist logic in music criticism that ghettoizes women musicians, reifies “rockist” (and as such, masculinist) standards for authentic and high-quality performance, and ultimately denigrates women pop musicians as “merely” products of the music industry machine (2016:85,88).
These challenges to Swift’s authenticity do not exist outside of broader conversations about “authentic” or “proper” country music making. As Stimeling makes explicit, “regardless of the species, discourse about authenticity are often used to legitimate the aesthetic, political, and social agendas of those ascribing authenticity” (2016:87). These particular agendas become clear when examining the controversy surrounding the release of 1989, and by reading the gaps between Swift’s account of the album’s production and those of “bro-country” journalists like “Trigger” of the online magazine Saving Country Music we can get at a clear demonstration of the stakes of this particular authenticity game.

Swift admits that on Red, she “had one foot in pop and one foot in country, and that’s really no way to walk and get anywhere” (Horton 2014), and was invested in continuing to “evolve as an artist.” Swift notes that her songwriting process was internally motivated, and that she was trying to make music that was “natural for her” at this stage in her career. Though this move is decidedly pop, her songwriting maintains some “country” aspects, such as an autobiographical bendt. On her albums, she says, “it’s all autobiographical because I think it’s much more interesting for me to tell a true story than a story I kind of conjured up” (Horton 2014). This narrative emphasizes Swift’s agency in her own songwriting process and a primary dedication to “her music” before allegiance to generic norms. This classic stake in moral authenticity is typical fare for “classic country” “outlaws” and country-rock superstars alike. Yet, for some critics, this explanation didn’t seem to sit right.
“Taylor Swift’s country run is in the books, and she’s now a pop star exclusively. // And for the love of God people, please don’t tell me she was never country to begin with. That goes without saying,” says prototypical country-bro blogger/journalist “Trigger,” writing for Saving Country Music (2014). While Trigger is working from the Rolling Stone cover piece about 1989, which announces without much fanfare that the album itself “signals her transition from a country star who likes pop to a straight-up pop star” (Rolling Stone 2014), his conclusions and those of Rolling Stone reporter Josh Eells are quite different. Trigger emphasizes the role that Big Machine producer Scott Borchetta played in her development as an artist, writing that “[Borchetta’s decision to bring in pop producer Max Martin] is the arguably the most important, most defining moment in Taylor Swift’s entire career up to this point” (Saving Country Music 2014). While he concedes that Swift “is not completely innocent,” he ultimately finds the locus of control for her musical transition in the external, corporate, and (critically) male figure of record producers Scott Borchetta and Max Martin. Trigger contends that “What endeared Taylor Swift to America and had critics coming to her defense was the fact that however pop she was, her songs were sincere expressions from her directly. She was the superstar that was also the girl next door… Choosing to go with Max Martin is about trading commercial acceptance over artistic substance” (Saving Country Music 2014). Trigger follows through on this characteristically misogynist argument, and in fact concludes with the spectacularly creepy declaration that since she’s “left country music” Swift is “now free to do what she wants …. Or what Max Martin wants to do with her” (Saving Country Music 2014). Trigger’s suspect of Scott Borchetta’s intentions with
Swift seems especially contrived given that the Rolling Stone cover he’s working with includes especially salient examples of Swift standing up for her own artistic integrity. In fact, when Borchetta asked “Can you just give me three country songs?” Swift replied, “Love you, meanit. But this is how it’s going to be” (Eells, Rolling Stone 2014). One wonders at the motivation behind Trigger’s characterization of Swift as passive non-actor floating along with the whims of male producers/handlers.

We can read Trigger’s attempt to cast Swift as non-actor as part of a broader misogynist tendency in popular music generally which serves to delegitimize women artists as “inauthentic,” despite often valiant attempts to perform and conform to norms for authentic country music performance. However, Swift’s early attempts to play the authenticity game with a deployment of rural biography do ring false. For example, despite Swift’s affluent suburban Pennsylvania background (her father is a financial consultant for Merrill Lynch) - she made frequent recourse to a narrative of agricultural labor by recounting memories of her father’s hobby Christmas tree farm, where her “job” was to remove praying mantises from the trees. In the broader context of her career trajectory (which included a family move to Nashville in order to support Swift’s songwriting career), this claim to rural origins and agricultural work are read as infelicitous - though they are part of a broader tendency in country music to emphasize musicians’ rural, working class biographies. Importantly, however, these claims aren’t and in fact cannot be read in a vacuum that brackets off Swift’s age and gender - one wonders if a older or male singer would be subject to the same virulent criticisms. Eric Church, for example, is similarly genre deviant (blending hard rock with country music)
and his move to Nashville was also funded by his father - yet his “authenticity,” not to mention more fundamental status as a country musician, is not called into question (Eric Church Biography).

Cut and Run

Throughout this chapter I’ve spent time articulating the ways that authenticity plays out at the level of the country music genre. Following on Judith Butler’s conception of gender as “a historical situation” (1988:523), I understand a genre as the shifting result of aesthetic and political events that build up over time to produce any genre, in this case country, as an intelligible category that appears both discrete and even somehow “natural.” By taking a look at moments when country music seemed to “talk about itself,” I attempted to make clear the stakes of authenticity claims at both the genre’s center (awards shows) and periphery (genre deviance). In both situations, genre policing discourse is often couched in language that centers questions of authenticity regardless of whether the debates emphasize the “right way” to perform country music or attempt to demarcate what is or isn’t “authentically” country.
Works Cited


http://www.savingcountrymusic.com/taylor-swift-is-leaving-country-but-will-country-let-her/.
Country Music and National Politics

On 19 January 2017, the song texts and performances I’d been working with all year sprung to life on screen and the national stage. I was watching the Inauguration of Donald Trump on the cable TV at a pizza shop just off campus. Toby Keith was in the middle of a four song set of his most patriotic hits - most of which were written in the just after the September 11 attacks and published in the few years that followed. I had been planning to use all of the songs Keith performed in this thesis well before the election, and certainly before the inaugural performance - but to watch as these pieces became suddenly and almost anachronistically prominent had a surreal quality. The popular relevance of my research quickly became terribly clear. While Keith sang songs about the virtues of military might and capital punishment, the twenty-something delivery guy behind the counter declared, “country music is a plot by the CIA to keep the South stupid.”

At once, I was presented with perhaps the most stereotyped element of contemporary country music and the worst of classist/regionalist anti-country sentiment. While the pizza shop employee was demonstrating a well-documented bias against both country music in general and Southern/rural Americans in general, his reaction is rooted in a fairly accurate read of the genre’s complicity with a broadly right-wing nationalist political vision. This complicity and its reactionary ripples are the subject of this chapter, since what “really counts” as country music is, as we will see, is just as political as it is musical, textual, or generic. Starting with Toby Keith’s performance at
Donald Trump’s Inauguration, we’ll read back to the release of his two 9/11 reaction albums *Unleashed* (2002) and *Shock and Y’all* (2003), as well as his feud with Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks. We’ll then examine the broader political controversy surrounding the Dixie Chicks excommunication from country music (which was caused entirely by their counter-hegemonic political speech rather than any musical deviance), and conclude with a discussion of the broad relevance of country music affect to national politics today.

It’s no accident that, of all the popular country singers who could have participated in Trump’s Inaugural Celebration, Toby Keith was selected. His performance at the concert, formally titled the “Make America Great Again! Welcome Celebration” and held on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, consisted of four major hits from Keith’s oeuvre which share a focused right-wing message that clearly underscores specific talking points from the Trump campaign: economic-nationalism, militarism, and a tough-on-crime domestic policy. Three of the songs performed ["American Soldier;” “Whiskey For My Men;” and “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (the Angry American)"] were written and published between 2002-2003 as part of Keith’s reaction to 9/11 and the beginning of the War in Iraq. The other, “Made In America,” was published in 2011.

Part of what I experienced as surreal about the performance is the temporal disjuncture between the time of these songs publication and their performance at the Inaugural Celebration. One can understand the militarist aggression of, for example, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue” as a legitimate, if misguided, response to a
recent attack on the United States - lyrics like “we’ll put a boot in your ass / it’s the American way” make sense in 2002. However at the 2017 Inaugural concert, in a time of high national security, this reading becomes significantly less intelligible. As Andrew Boulton notes in his “The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)ds of Post-9/11 Country Music,” country music often follows the same “othering” logic of us-vs-them when it’s engaging with the internal “culture war” between urban elites and rural/Southern (white) working class that it does when addressing international/military conflict. While Boulton contends that “particular facets of the War on Terror are subsumed under a general territorial logic of homogeneously hostile regions distant from the United States” (2008:378), this reading is decidedly not amenable to the Inaugural context. In order to understand the impact of Keith’s Inaugural performance, we have to work back to the particular moment when the bulk of Keith’s setlist was written, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. As I have indicated in earlier chapters, the kinds of rhetorical or musical references made by country musicians are part of a vast intertextual system that can be mobilized to locate a singer’s performance both in terms of generic history and personal or political identity. As challenging as it may be to “place” country music geographically due its trans-regional (and even international) appeal, this chapter is an attempt to “place” the genre ideologically using country controversy, song lyrics, and the deployment of country music by political actors.
Aesthetics and Popular-(Geo)politics in Post 9/11 Country

Boulton notes that the popular audience for country music extends far beyond its imagined “rural, Southern constituency” and is, in fact, a cultural product that can “claim to have a truly national reach within the United States” (2008:376). Rather than reflecting/being marketed to one particular regional subgroup the “imagined community” indexed by country music can also be conceived of as a broadly Jacksonian political community, characterized by an emphasis on populism, patriotism, and self reliance (2008:376). However, when it comes to assessing any particular cultural product (whether a concert, magazine article, or comic book), the limited information obtainable about the audience and the multiplicity of sources from which individuals makes it “notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to measure” the “actual” effect of that product (2008:376). However, thankfully for both of us, Boulton does give some allowance to his production-focused methodology by insisting that “texts are in part constituted by their discursive context and in part constitutive of that context” (2008:377).

Aaron Fox claims in “Alternative to What?” that 9/11 was a pivotal moment for discourses on class in the United States, in addition to “cultural fields (including country music) that articulate with this discourse” (2015:172). He notes that as blue-collar figures such as rescue workers and soldiers “loomed up from the rubble of the World Trade Center,” the attacks fomented the emergence of a “crisis of national identity that would come to center in part around masculinity, whiteness, and the costs of embracing global capitalism” (2015:172). Country music “rushed” into the discursive cracks
between patriotic national identity and a “postmodern” politics of globalization that the September 11 attacks created. According to Fox’s account, this is common practice for country music in times of war (all of Wolfe and Akenson’s 2015 edited “Country Music Goes To War” addresses this phenomenon), but the “working-class hero” of American country music became “as ever... the subject of feverish construction and hegemonic appropriation,” thus producing pressing a complex field of class and racial politics into a simplified reduction for use “in the service of particular class ideologies and political ambitions” (2015:173).

While for Fox this reading of the aesthetic and political renegotiation following the September 11 attacks serves as a component part of a broader argument about the kinds of class-play that suggests a central “inauthenticity” at the heart of alt-country (which can and has been read as more “authentic” by the elites of the hipster-class that Fox subtly criticizes in “Alternative to What?”), for our purposes it serves just to illustrate the shakeup in contemporary country music after the attacks, as well as set the theoretical tone for the description and analysis that follows. What’s important to take away from the above is that while the discursive field theoretically available to country musicians and songwriters experienced a significant opening in the months immediately following 9/11, it was by no means open season. As we will see, songwriting tended to fall into particular tropes that roughly aligned with conservative/nationalist or pro-war views. Additionally, while the arguably most successful 9/11 reaction song (“Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” by Alan Jackson provided an opportunity for listeners to reflect on - rather than react to - the attacks, the scope of
these reflections are contingent on the discursive environment in which they take place -- local political, aesthetic, and linguistic factors all play a role in allowing for or disallowing particular interpretations. In the case of country music, as we will see with the Dixie Chicks, “telling it like it is” can have quite dire effects on the careers and reputations of those “telling it” according to non-normative codes.

The Inaugural Celebration

As I mentioned above, Toby Keith’s set at the Inaugural Celebration consisted of four songs. In order, they were “American Soldier” (2003), “Made In America” (2011), “Beer for My Horses” (2003), and “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue (the Angry American)” (2002). Each underscores a particular element of Trump’s militarist/nationalist political project while also providing a somewhat disorienting temporal dislocation by being, for the most part, songs popularized in the musical aftermath of the September 11 attacks and part of Toby Keith’s 9/11 reaction.

“American Soldier” is a straightforward paean for the titular American soldier. Framing military service in parallel with an office job, the lyric begins ambiguous with regards to its subject. The narrator/subject “up and at ’em bright and early” and is “all business in [their] suit” - but any ambiguity begins to dissolve as it’s made increasingly clear that the narrator/subject is a soldier with the line “dressed up for success from my head down to my boots.” The song (re)produces an image of US soldiers as moral/ethical paragons who are in but not of the broader working fabric of the national economy. That is to say,
they manage to be considered both valuable and hard working (despite their status as government employees) through their representation as sacred.

The second song, “Made in America” highlights the economic nationalism that characterized Trump’s campaign rhetoric, and features as its protagonists a “heartland” American couple - a farmer and retired Marine and his teacher wife. Invested in a traditional patriotism and self-reliance, the song’s chorus celebrates the couple’s commitment to American-made goods, “Spend a little more in the store for a tag in the back that says ‘USA’” and self-reliance “He won’t buy nothin’ that he can’t fix, with WD40 and a Craftsman wrench.” The third song, “Beer for My Horses” is a tough-on-crime anthem. As to the song’s narrative, it “tells of a group of men who Lynch some criminals then celebrate with a round of drinks at a saloon.”\(^7\) The tune closes with the frankly harrowing lines: “We got too many gangsters doin’ dirty deeds/We’ve got too much corruption and crime in the streets/It’s time the long arm of the law put a few more in the ground/Send ‘em all to their maker and he’ll settle ‘em down.” This ringing endorsement of vigilante justice and capital punishment as a clear affinity with Trump’s “tough on crime” promises and apparent disregard for extrajudicial executions by police (not to mention nativist terrorists).

The final song performed at the Inaugural Celebration is perhaps Keith’s most famous tune, “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue (the Angry American).” The song was released in 2002 as the lead single for the album *Unleashed*, and was met with controversy as well as incredible commercial and radio success. The lyric is

straightforward and aggressive, serving as a warning to a vaguely defined enemy of the United States and a reminder of America’s military might. The lyric “we’ll put a boot in your ass, it’s the American way” indicates a tradition of American militarist intervention, and as a whole the piece attempts neither a moral justification militarist action nor an opportunity for sacral reflection (which differentiates it from other 9/11 reaction songs such as Alan Jackson’s “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?” or even Keith’s own incredibly problematic but at least more humanizing “Taliban Song”). The song came to stand in for the popular reaction to the September 11 attacks and served as part of the base of the ideological conflict between Toby Keith and the Dixie Chicks at issue in the following section.

Bashing Bush, Ditching the Dixie Chicks

On a London stage in March 2003, on the eve of the United States invasion of Iraq, Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks uttered fifteen words that would shake the foundations of the country music establishment, lead to hearings of the Senate Commerce Committee, and ignite perhaps the biggest feud in country music history: “Just so you know, we’re ashamed the President of the United States is from Texas” (Rudder 2015:208). While this seemingly innocuous comment was far from the most trenchant or inflammatory of the critiques of President Bush’s proposed military action (even from within country music - Steve Earle had started to begin some of his shows...
by “shouting the Shahada... in Arabic” [2015:208]), this comment appeared to rattle more listeners than any other. Why is this? And why does it matter?

Randy Rudder, in his article “In Whose Name? Country Artists Speak Out on Gulf War II,” tracks the outrage to a general sense of betrayal on the part of country music listeners. For one, the Dixie Chicks were playing in London when the comment was made, rather than in the United States, which may have added to the notion that the band were “disloyal” Americans. Moreover, the Chicks had played the National Anthem at the start of that year’s Superbowl and were at the time airing the single “Travelin’ Soldier,” a sensitive narrative about young love lost to war -- hardly the kind of material that would seem to predicate an anti-military screed (2015:210), which may have amplified a kind of affective whiplash that made those “fifteen little words” seem so egregious. Despite Maines’ half-hearted apology in an interview with Diane Sawyer, country DJs were unconvinced of her patriotic bona fides and continued to host Dixie-Chicks CD-smashing parties as components of pro-war rallies (2015:212).

The Dixie Chicks controversy heated up even further in June, when Natalie Maines told the LA Daily News that she “hate[d]” the “Courtesy of the Red White and Blue.” According to Maines, the song is “It’s ignorant and it makes country music sound ignorant. It targets an entire culture-and not just the bad people who did bad things. You’ve got to have some tact. Anybody can write, ‘We’ll put a boot in your ass’” (2015:215). Toby Keith responded by asserting his critical and commercial successes as a songwriter and responding to a reporter who asked about his reaction to Maine’s comments by saying “that’s like asking Barry Bonds what he thought about what a
softball player said about his swing" (2015:216). This comment reflects both a rhetoric of the “self-made man” whose rightness - and righteousness - can be read flatly from professional success, as well as a gendered masculinist subtext (no [woman] softball player is, to Keith’s mind, in a position to question the talent of the [male] baseball star Barry Bonds). In addition to these digs, Keith began using a doctored image of Natalie Maines standing next to Saddam Hussein. In response, Maines wore a white t-shirt with black letters reading “F.U.T.K.” at the May 2003 Academy of Country Music Awards. While her publicist at the time insisted that the acronym stood for “Freedom, Understanding, Tolerance, and Knowledge,” that the shirt was supposed to signal “Fuck You Toby Keith” was clear to any regular country music listener. Maines herself admitted as much in the 2006 documentary on the controversy Shut Up and Sing.

Additionally, the Chicks were the targets of alleged censorship by Cumulus Media, a radio conglomerate that owns thousands of radio stations. According to Rudder, “Cumulus essentially issued a statement that ‘allowed’ local program directors the prerogative of banning the Chicks’ music if they felt the need to do so. Also, one of the CD smashing rallies in Louisiana was sponsored by KRMD, a Cumulus station” (2015:214). The personal and professional attacks of the band are indicative of an unspoken and unmusical requirement for participation in country music proper - a more or less center-right political orientation. Perceptions of artists as left-wing, and thus un-American, can have dire consequences - and as such “performing” right-wing patriotism can be considered as important as performing generic musical conventions.
So what does all this have to do with Donald Trump?

This digression through the politics and aesthetics of post-9/11 country music brings us back around to the puzzle that faced me at the beginning of the chapter. How were Toby Keith’s mid-career militaristic anthems deployed in 2017, more than 15 years after their initial musical/cultural moment, as part of Donald Trump’s Inaugural Celebration? How and why was this music made to mean in such a markedly different political context? In her 1997 book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, contemporary philosopher Judith Butler gives us some answers. “The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through citation of existing convention” (Butler 1997:33). Through this lens, we can understand Toby Keith’s performance as an attempt to “introduce a new reality” through the “citation of existing convention” -- in other words, part of a project intended to make real the external threat that Trump (through Keith as his performative avatar) promises to “boot” through reference to an earlier temporal moment. As we saw in chapters two and three, these lyrical and stylistic references are part of a broader feature of country music to not only embed a singer’s performance in specific generic history, but also to manipulate that existing code for the purposes of building an identity for themselves in their own contemporary place. This emplacement is to be understood as both temporal and stylistic.
In the specific case of Keith’s performance at Donald Trump’s Inaugural Celebration, Butler’s use of “inaugurate” becomes almost too convenient. The word itself has its origins in Ancient Rome, where it referred to the practice of interpreting omens (especially the flight of birds; the role of the augur was in fact an official religio-governmental position). One is reminded here of the opinion polling conducted before the 2016 presidential election which, at least in my own corner of the US mediascape, seemed to consistently predict a relatively easy win for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. From within “country music USA,” however, the view was quite different. At a house party just before the election, the residents of my rural PA hometown were convinced of Trump’s inevitable victory. While I doggedly (and drunkenly) begged anyone who bothered to listen to consider the implications of Trump’s campaign rhetoric, everyone I talked to was excited for a candidate who finally “[told] it like it is.” Indeed, well before the actual swearing-in, Trump had begun to “inaugurate” - in the Butlerian sense - the political and social reality that suited his candidacy, fabricating a “political moment” that makes a figure like himself appear as a natural outgrowth of common sentiments not only by inducing those sentiments in potential voters, but by introducing a “new reality” that makes the sentiments themselves appear to be “authentic.”
“Send ‘er home”

In this chapter, I abstracted yet another level into the relationship between national politics, war, and globalization. As a kind of interpretive touchstone with which country fans make sense of their lives and the world, the ideological valences of country music become an important concern with regards to the political impact of the genre (as well as the impact of politics on the genre). While country music is surely not the exclusive source for a country listener’s ideological orientation, it offers an affective and interpretive opportunity for listeners to feel their way through increasingly complicated global political landscapes. Along with cable news, religion, local custom, etc., country music becomes a key site for the negotiation of various political sentiments, especially populism and nationalism. The actual “impact” of any piece of media is notoriously difficult, if not impossible to measure (Boulton 2008), however attempting to trace the impact of the genre’s “ideological work” is an opportunity to better conceptualize the relationship between (inter)national politics and country music’s “authenticity.” It’s clear from the analysis in this chapter that mainstream country music has a close “working relationship” with nationalist conservatism. Artists who fail to conform to broadly right-leaning political projects can be punished by “the industry” by choking out radio play. While these political articulations with country music may seem to have little to do with the kinds of generic authenticity explored elsewhere in this thesis, I contend that seemingly extramusical logics of authenticity are at play in determining the kinds of speech in which country musicians are “allowed” to engage.
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Once More, for the People in the Back

In the introduction to this thesis, I laid out in broad terms the stakes of this kind of academic project. Authenticity, which as we’ve seen means vastly different things to different people, is a crucially important aspect of understanding ourselves and our own cultural products. Throughout, I’ve attempted to make explicit the differences between the many varieties of authenticity (predominantly, moral and type - but also etiological and alternative), however, I also want to contend that all of these interpretations of authenticity collapse into an “other form of capital,” claims to which serve to consolidate aesthetic, political, and social power - largely, though not exclusively, for critical and commercial prominence. To speak of something, in this case music, that matters so much to the lives of listeners (listeners very much like myself) as “products” cultural or otherwise, seems to me to sidestep the high personal stakes involved with their circulation. And yet, at the same time, the market logics that box in all the various things that people do and say and sing and write and eat and believe as commodities to be traded seem completely inescapable. In fact, many of those cultural “things” can and do only exist as part and product of a vast industry which is ultimately reliant on a profit motive.

Country music, used in this thesis as a test case through which I can examine some of the ways authenticity functions and the consequences of competing approaches to authenticity, has been broadly characterized as a genre particularly obsessed with authenticity itself. Country music's own socio-historical roots in both
"traditional" folk music as well as popular song have positioned it at an uncomfortable edge between both market logic and a kind of cultural logic which posits country music as the autochthonous outgrowth of a particular people (working class, white Southerners). This instability, and the resulting "dialectical" relationship between hard-core and soft-shell country, seems to be responsible for the maintenance of country music as a distinct musical genre that remains meaningfully distinct from pop or rock music despite the obvious influence that these genres have had on the contemporary development of country music. For Richard Peterson, as for myself, "authenticity" is -- in addition to a kind of symbolic capital -- a gravitational force that keeps the disparate particles of what we call country music stuck together. In the previous few chapters I've attempted to explain some of the ways this gravitational force works on country music in particular, with attention to the way the music operates at three distinct levels.

In the first chapter, the first level, I looked at country songs themselves with specific attention paid to the song texts themselves. As many scholars have pointed out, country songs are largely about the lyrics and country songwriting and production tends in this direction. While there are some notable exceptions (especially within alternative country, where even a dedicated listener to a singer like Sturgill Simpson can barely understand his lyrics in live performances and even on some recordings), the "meaning" of country songs obtains in the words to the songs themselves. As such, the discursive space of country lyrics becomes an important site of the establishment and negotiation of authenticity within country music. In my analysis, I found that authenticity can largely
be asserted through the mobilization of country music history -- understanding the
canon of popular “country heroes” and deploying their names and famous lyrics can
position an artist within a particular lineage and help to establish a singer’s honky tonk
bona fides. Additionally, the sonic texture of country music becomes important not only
in terms of “authentic” instrumentation (a singer with a steel-guitar in their band, for
example, is usually making a claim to “hard-core” history) but also in terms of the
particular Barthesian “grain of the voice.” Performing musical impressions is a
component of developing one’s own voice as a singer/songwriter in local scenes (Fox
2004), but also serves to establish a singer's legitimacy later in their careers.
Possession of an “authentic” voice is as much a lyrical/writerly decision as it is the
outcome of a particular sonic socialization within country music.

In the second chapter I focus on the broader genre of country music, abstracted
a level from the songs or albums themselves and honing in on the edges of what
“counts” as country music. My objects of analysis for this chapter were still largely
examples of country music “talking about itself” and still demonstrated a preoccupation
with generic history and secure generic borders. Genre deviating artists such as Taylor
Swift and Garth Brooks/Chris Gaines are important for the ways the serve to demarcate
generic borders. Conversely, controversies within country music about awards shows
and industry recognition flesh out the complicated interiority of the field called country
music. I found that when genre deviance is punished, criticism of deviant artist action is
often couched in authenticity-focused language. Moreover, in-group criticisms of country
music industry award shows and memorials are often similarly based on “authenticity,”
but these feuds tend to focus more on the “right way” to perform authenticity rather than what is or isn’t “authentically” country.

Finally, in the Chapter 3, I abstracted another level out of the specifically music or generic into the relationship between country music and national politics and globalization. Country music is a central (though certainly never the exclusive) interpretive touchstone for many listeners’ projects of meaning-making. The political or ideological framework of country music both constitutes and is constituted by numerous other sources (including cable news, religion, local custom, etc), and as such country music becomes a key site for the affective negotiation of various political sentiments, especially populism and nationalism. Attempting to trace the impact of this ideological work on the genre is a key way to understand another important feature of country music’s “authenticity” - its tight working relationship with nationalist conservatism. By tracking the recent historical roots of Toby Keith’s performance at Donald Trump’s Inaugural Celebration back to his feud with the Dixie Chicks’ Natalie Maines, I found that artists who fail to conform to broadly right-leaning political projects can be punished by “the industry” by choking out radio play. While these political articulations with country music may seem to have little to do with the kinds of generic authenticity explored elsewhere in this thesis, I contend that seemingly extramusical logics of authenticity are at play in determining the kinds of speech in which country musicians are “allowed” to engage. Moreover, the deployment of familiar and “authentic” cultural forms such as country music helps to orient Trump’s new administration by reviving the “feeling” of the post-9/11 geopolitical moment.